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CRITIQUING THE POETICS OF THE “RED ROCK”: T. S. ELIOT’S “THE HIPPOPOTAMUS” AND  
“MR. ELIOT’S SUNDAY MORNING SERVICE”

YOUSUF ALI

Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, U. P., India



ABSTRACT

The scientific advancement in contemporary “Machine Age” has accelerated the growth of economy that has eventually generated the mentality of modern man engulfed by the mercantile and materialistic spirit. This merely worldly attitude results in the degeneration of religious values in modern times in the process. In this way, the ethical ambience of the earlier society has now been weakened immensely. The Church is only to maintain and uphold the religious spirit in society. But the Church has also failed to do so, for the churchmen have become corrupted. Instead of being the apotheosis of sacrifice and perfection, they exploit their ecclesiastical power to feed their hunger for worldly wealth. Thus, the churchmen also, quite unexpectedly, exhibit their materialistic mindset that essentially comes to wrestle with anything spiritual. This degradation of the Church has arrested the notice of T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), one of the most important and influential poet, critic and dramatist of the twentieth century, who in his poems like “The Hippopotamus” and “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service” has expressed his angst for the same. These two poems launch Eliot’s attack on the Church owing to such clerical corruption in contemporary world. In this paper I shall argue for the fact that these two poems are in fact a critique of the established poetics or the lofty ideals about the Church which is often referred to by Eliot as “the Grey Rock” or “the Red Rock” in some of his poetry.

**Key words:** scientific, contemporary, machine, economy, materialistic, values, degeneration, Church, society, sacrifice, perfection, angst, attack, concerned, critique, established, lofty, poetics, rock etc.

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.... Thereon

She cast herself upon the ground  
And rent her clothes and made her moan:  
‘Why are they faithless when their might

Is from the holy shades that rove  
 The gray rock and the windy light?  
 Why should the faithfulest heart most love  
 The bitter sweetness of false faces?  
 Why must the lasting love what passes,  
 Why are the gods are by men betrayed?'(107-116)

— W. B. Yeats, "The Grey Rock"

Readers of T. S. Eliot's poetry can unfailingly come across the fact that almost the complete spectrum of his poetry registers an explicit concern over the gradual extinction of moral values in contemporary society. Depiction of the multifaceted catastrophic consequences due to the collapse of moral foundation also occupies acres of space in his poetry. Some of Eliot's poems, which were written after the First World War (1914-1918), portray the more sordid picture of modern life owing to this lack of moral or religious values that was largely provoked by the aftershock of the War. Some of these poems such as "Gerontion", *The Waste Land*, *Ash-Wednesday*, "Journey of the Magi", "A Song for Simeon", *Choruses from 'The Rock'* etc. not only illustrate the meanness and misery of modern times but also dwell upon some religious solutions to these problems of moral degradation. In this context Kerry Weinberg comments "Much of Eliot's later poetry has lost the impact and verve and freshness of his earlier verse. He endeavored to show his contemporary "hollow men" a way out of the chaos and decay..." He further says "...whereas Eliot's earlier poetry speaks to modern man through its very complexity, one gets the impression that he tends — psychologically — to oversimplify in his later verse in suggesting Anglo-Catholicism as a sinecure for everyone and everything" (42). That the poetry of Eliot incorporates some moral lesson can also be conjectured by Eliot's own view of literature as he wrote in his *Essays Ancient and Modern*, "Literature, — I mean, again, primarily works of imagination, — has been, is, and probably always will be judged by some moral standards." (94) In his personal life too Eliot had attachment to morality that was primarily influenced by his own mother Charlotte Champe Stearns (1843-1930) who was devoted to social activities during her life. Eliot's moral standards were, to some extent, formulated by Christian creeds as were practiced by the Anglican Church. Although he was brought up in Unitarianism, he felt uneasy with the doctrines of the Unitarian philosophy.

The family background included the extreme form of Protestant rationalism known as Unitarianism and the philosophies of Schleiermacher, Emerson, Channing and Herbert Spencer were held in high regard. Unitarianism to Eliot seems intimately connected with what he calls 'the Boston doubt: a skepticism which is difficult to explain to those who are not born to it. This skepticism is ...not destructive, but it is dissolvent'. In another context, however, he speaks of 'the best aspect of Unitarianism, a kind of emotional reserve and intellectual integrity.' It is clear that in maturity he found much in this teaching that appealed to his temperament, whether or not the temperament itself had been gradually formed by the teaching. But a child, one suppose, may quite possibly have been irked by the austerity of Unitarianism. It lacked the picturesque elements of most Christian creeds. In fact, it excluded itself from Christianity... (Smidt 3)

Eliot himself says:

I was brought outside the Christian Fold, in Unitarianism; and in the form of Unitarianism in which I was instructed, things were either black or white. The Son and the Holy Ghost were not believed in, certainly; but they were entitled to respect as entities in which many other people believed. (Book review, *Credit Reform*)

He also criticized Puritanical orthodoxy and displayed liberal mentality. In fact, Eliot was logical in judging things both ethical and the worldly. The former was more important to him as the larger bulk of his poetry scripts his concern over the spiritual sterility in the contemporary world. Some of his poems articulate his resentment against the corruption of the Church which is often referred to by Eliot as "the Rock" or "the Gray Rock" or "the Red Rock". This reference to the Church as "the Red Rock" might have been inspired by the description of Christ as the "spiritual Rock" in the Corinthians I (x, 3-5). According to Eliot the Church is a holy place and has spiritual significance. It also has important religious roles assigned by God to rectify society.

Above all the Church stands for hope for the people who repent for their wrong doings. In short, a Church is to show the right path to people and promote peace among them. It has nothing to do with the profits that are materialistic or purely worldly. Thus, the church possesses a number of beautiful and noble associations. But, to Eliot's utter surprise the Church has gone corrupted in modern times. It is no longer in a position to lead people towards what is right and stand for spirituality. It has become almost a failure institution and now the clerics of the Church are more concerned with worldly pleasure than the spiritual happiness. Thus, the nobility associated with the Church or the poetics of the Church, "the Red Rock" comes under Eliot's attack.

Eliot's shorter poems "The Hippopotamus" and "Mr. Eliot' Sunday Morning Service" effectively foreground the corruption of the Church. The former voices a scathing satire on the growing worldliness and ethical apathy of the Church. The title of the poem "The Hippopotamus" is full of overt sarcasm. The word "hippopotamus" means a large dark skinned animal with short legs and the church is compared with it in order to unmask the harsh reality of the religious pretensions of the members connected to the Church who exploit this sacred institution for, quite paradoxically, pursuing materialistic gains which, in turn, come to wrestle with spirituality itself in the process. The epigraph to the poem also adds another dimension to this theme of the adulteration of the Church. According to Eloise Knapp Hay, the epigraph has two parts, one is adopted from St. Ignatius that occurs in the American edition and another from the Epistle to the Colossians (iv, 16) by St. Paul who wrote this Epistle in the First Century A. D. in order to benedict the Christian at Colossae and Laodicea at the early stage. Here in this part of the Epistle quoted in the epigraph, the belief of these Christians is being encouraged and it is also instructed that these encouraging words should be reached to the Laodiceans. According to B. C. Southam, the Christians and the Laodicea at the early stage were oscillating between Christianity and Judaism and in the Bible (Revelation, iii, 16-17), the faith of the Laodiceans is described as "lukewarm" because they say they are rich and so they do not need anything. The Revelation records God's saying:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked... (15-18)

Thus, the Laodiceans stand for the spiritually weak souls as also found in Dante's hell, where these spiritually feeble or blind souls are projected as "lukewarm". They led life without praise and blame. So, they are rejected by both heaven as well as hell. Dante describes them as people who "never were alive, were naked, and sorely goaded by hornets and by wasps" (*Inferno*, iii, 64-66). In fact, the clergy in the poem under discussion take after these Laodiceans. The spiritual hollowness of the clergy is intensified by the previous part of the epigraph that ironically recalls the reverence showed to the clergy for their service to the Church. St. Ignatius utterance call for reverence for the churchmen: "In the like manner, let all reverence the Deacons as Jesus Christ, and the Bishop as the Father, and the Presbyter as the council of God, and the assembly of the Apostles. Without these there is no Church. Concerning all which I am persuaded that ye think in the same way" (Quoted by Hay 41). But this reference to the reverence to be shown to the churchmen is designed by Eliot in order to juxtapose the ethical ambience of the past and the present. So, Eliot's reference to such honour of the churchmen is to satirize the present churchmen who are corrupt and not worthy of any respect or honour. Thus, that the reference to St. Ignatius, which is incorporated in the previous part of the epigraph, is meant only for the negation of the veneration that one ought to have for the churchmen is also confirmed by Eloise Knapp Hay. He states:

St. Ignatius's words demand reverence for the churchmen (a reverence which of course the poem destroys) saying that without these churchmen, nothing is left.... The poem leaves no doubt that Eliot thinks "in the same way" and that therefore the Church's doctrines are as void as the men who hold them. (I must reemphasize... the "actuality" he expressed in the poems,... is as much a matter of his own feeling as of that of the churchmen he is lampooning.) (41-42)

Thus, Eliot in the poem under discussion ridicules the churchmen as he thinks that they are not worthy of the ideals of honour and admiration as revealed by St. Ignatius' words to Trallians, for they have become corrupted. The poem "The Hippopotamus" begins with the physical description of the animal hippopotamus:

The broad-backed hippopotamus  
Rests on his belly in the mud;  
Although he seems so firm to us  
He is merely flesh and blood. (1-4)

Reading between the lines quoted above does not evoke any "estrangement" or additional literariness in the description of hippopotamus as usual in Eliot's poetry. The portrayal of the animal as purely "flesh and blood" is very obvious. But the second line: "Rests on his belly on the mud" initiates the point which Eliot aims at incorporating into very texture of the poem. Here, the use of the word "mud" which the hippopotamus rests on juxtaposes with the word "rock", which appear at the end of the second stanza of the poem, in terms of solidity. The second stanza in its totality contrasts the hippopotamus who is weak for being of flesh and blood which is, as Eliot says, "weak and frail" with the "True Church" which is strong and would never fail because it is founded on a rock that reminds us Christ's words to Peter: "thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church" (Mathew xvi, 18). Here in the poem under discussion, Eliot seems to highlight the Church only to deepen his satire at the end. As the poem grows and develops we see the rock becomes weaker and shakier than the mud. According to the poet, an animal like hippopotamus can seek materialistic and gross pleasures but the churchmen who represent sacrifice, should not entertain such materialistic pleasures. But, they also aspire for such worldly things in contemporary world. The poem tries to present the actual picture of the Church in comparison with the animal:

The 'potamus can never reach  
The mango on the mango tree;  
But fruits of pomegranate and peach  
Refresh the Church from over sea. (13-16)

Pure materialistic festivity becomes the order of the Church, which rather the hippopotamus cannot perform: "The hippo's feeble steps may err/In compassing material ends, /While the True Church" gathers its dividends. Eliot not only mentions the churchmen's festive eating and financial profit but refers to other forms of enjoyment as well: "But every week we hear rejoice/The Church, at being one with God." This line has sexual overtones in that such entertainment is initiated with the sexual imagery of the animal: "At mating time the hippo's voice/Betrays inflexions hoarse and odd". Eliot here seems to point out the spiritual vacuity of the churchmen who have become the pleasure seeker like the hippopotamus. The comparison of the Church to the hippopotamus is well designed by the poet so as to emphasize the animal like behavior of the churchmen. Eliot here in this poem also shows the fact that the "odd" behavior of the hippopotamus is not worrying, rather it is natural for an animal. But the activities of the clergy or the churchmen are really full of disappointment. The clergy's behavior is one kind of reversion. Such materialistic behavior does not suit any persons associated with the Church. So, the concluding stanza of the poem shocks the reader's general expectation since the hippopotamus enters the heaven while the Church cannot—

He shall be washed as white as snow,  
By all the martyr'd virgins kist,  
While the True Church remains below  
Wrapt in the old miasmal mist. (33-36)

Here, the phrase "miasmal mist" intensifies the befogged and decaying condition of the Church. Moreover, the olfactory image of the infectious gas evoked by the word "miasmal" means, at the level of metaphor, the negative consequences of this ethical degeneration which have eventually weaken the moral fabric of contemporary society. So, the sublimity associated with the church is a far cry in practice. This led Eliot to criticize pretentious poetics of the True Church or "the Red Rock".

Eliot's attack on the Church becomes more pointed in the poem "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service". The title of the poem, however, seems to glorify the church service performed on the Sunday morning. The

inclusion of the name of Mr. Eliot in the title rouses in the reader the anticipation that the poet Eliot himself is going to celebrate his own Sunday morning church service in the poem. But the epigraph to the poem jolts the reader's such expectation. The epigraph is adopted from Christopher Marlowe's (1564-1593) tragedy *The Jew of Malta* (IV, i). The words in the epigraph are of the servant Ithamore to his master Barabas, the Jew, when he witnesses two friars coming towards them. The servant and his master have just killed a convent of nuns by poisoning and they are also satirizing the ecclesiastical morals. When the friars, who see Ithamore and Barabas poisoning the convent of nuns, try to blackmail Barabas, he proposes to become a Christian for repentance and to offer his wealth to the friars who are also referred to as "the religious caterpillars". Thus, the epigraph manifests the fact that the clergy or the churchmen have become corrupted and they use their ecclesiastical authority just to feed their hunger for worldly wealth.

The very first line that we come across in the poem under discussion consists of a single word "Polyphiloprogenitive" which is Eliot's own coinage. The root word is "philoprogenitive" that, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, means "prolific; loving one's offspring". The prefix "poly" means much or many. Eliot designs the word in his own way in order to impart to the word an added emphasis on the meaningless proliferation of religious doctrines and interpretations which ultimately create huge confusion, skepticism and hopelessness. The proliferation of religious explanations is effectively expressed by the following lines with remarkable economy of words:

In the beginning was the Word.  
Superfetation of [the one],  
And at the mensual turn of time  
Produced enervate Origen. (5-8)

These lines are full of irony and satire. Here Eliot shows how modern "religious caterpillars" produce multiple religious doctrines from a single root word which is "God": "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God" (John I, I). The word "superfetation" simply means multiple impregnation of an ovary, producing twins or a huge number of berths. At the level of metaphor, the word captures the proliferation of ethical interpretations in a crude manner. Again, Origen, who was the first and most famous Christian theologian at the early stage, castrated himself solely to devout to ecclesiastical research and thus produced, according to Southam, "6,000 books and enormously long Biblical commentaries" which eventually generated a good deal of theological confusion and chaos. Eliot here mentions the name of Origen just to satirize the fruitless efforts of Christian scholar of the early stage along with the churchmen of the modern society whom Eliot terms as "sable". The word "sable" also indicates the sinful attitude of the churchmen as the word evokes a sense of something black which is generally associated with evil. And the sinful and materialistic temperament of the clergy is once again exposed by the lines: "The avenue of penitence;/The young are red and pustular/Clutching Piaculative pence." These lines very aptly tear asunder the pretentious activities of the presbyters. Here, Eliot shares his bitter experience with the religious exploitations by the clergy. The clergy takes money from the young sinner and provides them with the certificate of mercy. According to Eliot, owing to their such religious malpractice, the souls of the young sinners as well as of the presbyters cannot be cleansed of their sins by the purgatorial suffering as the poet says "the souls of the devout/ Burn invisible and dim."

It is very common in Eliot's poetry that he, quite often, deepens his satire with the help of the imagery drawn from the animal kingdom. Some of his poetry also abounds in the images of insects, which are used to heighten the ironical strain at the level of metaphor. In this poem too we come across the images of insects as appear in the following lines:

Along the garden-wall the bees  
With hairy bellies pass between  
The staminate and pistillate,  
Blest office of the epicene.

These lines quoted above compare the sexual neutrality of the bees, which is formed in the time they help processing the cross-pollination of flowers, with the castration of the theological scholar as we have already

noticed. Here, metaphorically this castration implies both physical and spiritual sterility of the religious scholar who can only give birth to confusing religious commentaries. Eliot's bitter satire is encountered with the appearance of Sweeney in the concluding stanza of the poem. Here, the reader expects the arrival of Mr. Eliot, but Sweeney figures instead. Sweeney in Eliot's Sweeney poems is portrayed in a negative way often heaping on him carnal metaphors. Thus, the appearance of Sweeney is unexpected and shocking. Eliot, perhaps, deliberately invites him to represent the clergy who are justly represented as the "religious caterpillars". Thus, the final stanza launches a severe attack on the materialistic churchmen.

In the conclusion it can hardly be an exaggeration to state that Eliot has very effectively captured the materialistic mentality of modern churchmen. They are in fact using their position only to make fortune out of that. In the poem "The Hippopotamus" the entering of the hippopotamus into the heaven while the True Church remains below, indicates that the religious men connected with the Church have gone down the lower rank than the animal in "the great chain of being". In the similar vein, the next poem "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" also strongly criticizes the adulteration of the Church. Eliot also points out that the noble and sublime thoughts associated with the Church that orchestrate the lofty ideals or in other words the poetics of "the Red Rock" are only in papers but not in practice. This lack of life-affirming religious spirit in the Church forces Eliot to question the poetics of "the Red Rock" or the True Church.

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